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A Step Towards the Reinvention of Graphic Design

Gui Bonsiepe

This paper was originally prepared in early 1993 for the Education Project developed Latin American for ICOGRADA (International Council of Graphic Design Associations). Participants have been asked to present their proposals following an outline formulated by the coordinator of the working group, Jose Korn Bruzzone.

I do not pretend exclusivity of or paternity over the proposals presented in this paper; nor do I expect an endorsement of my interpretations of the works consulted.[1] However, I do claim that the reassessment of graphic design and graphic design education differs from the design conceptions that represent the common sense understanding of graphic design. I want to draw attention to the fact that I repeatedly had to make use of neologisms and linguistic terms that are generally not related to the discourse of graphic design. This is not the result of pure whim. If we want to re-invent and re-construct graphic design, we have first of all to create linguistic distinctions capable of grasping a new reality that otherwise would not be understood if we remain bound to standard terminology.

Name and justification of graphic design as discipline
The term "graphic design" and its the corresponding term "graphic designer" have strong ties with a particular *technology*, i.e. *printing*. Therefore, graphic design runs the risk of not covering new phenomena that result from technological innovations, particularly computers and computerization. As new concepts arise such as:
- audiovisual means
- multimedia
- information management

they reveal the limitations of the traditional concept of "graphic design." We observe a growth in the domain that has been called *"retinal space."* This expansion requires a reconsideration of the skills and professional attributions of the graphic designer. This forces us to ponder the convenience of using a new term, recognizing the possibility and probability that this is a polemical issue.

1 Several of the proposals presented in this document have been discussed with colleagues in various regions of Latin America. Other sources which directly or indirectly present new perspectives on graphic design and graphic design education, include: the journal *Visible Language*, particularly the articles of Sharon Helmer Poggenpohl; the publications of the Graphic Design Education Association; the works of Richard Wurman and Ted Nelson; and articles by Victor Margolin.

It is traditionally understood that the graphic designer is mainly a visualizer, one who organizes visual components that are then reproduced with the aid of printing technology. Consequently, among the list of objects of professional action we find:

- logotypes
- stationary
- book and magazine layout
- advertisements and campaigns
- posters
- packages (labels)
- exhibitions
- displays
- corporate identity systems
- signage systems.

Without denying the merits of this understanding, one can ask whether the interpretation of graphic design solely in terms of visualization is sufficiently broad to face the larger challenges challenges of the information age. Therefore, I propose to put emphsis on *graphic design as information management and link it to the notion of information.*

Though this concept is far from clear, it would identify the central issue of graphic design today and for the future: *information and its organization.*

Notions such as:

- information explosion
- information glut
- visual pollution

reveal a set of new issues and problems that the graphic designer should confront. If there exists a predisposition to consider this possibility, then one can also consider the convenience of using a new name for the specialty: *"information designer" (or more compact: "info-designer").*

An info-designer approaches the tasks of efficient communication less from the perspective of visualization, or "creation" of images, but more from the perspective of organizing information. I propose to *shift the role of the graphic designer* from translation of information from a non-visual state into a visual state, to the *authorial organization of information.* This proposal reflects recent changes in technology known under terms like *hypermedia* and *hypertext,* where the world is seen as a huge data bank in which the reader is author of the information molecules that he or she collects and establishes connections. According to this line of speculation, visualization would be removed from its prima donna position and put into relation to a central question of today: *the organization of information for effective communication in the most diverse domains, from education to entertainment.*

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It is not by chance that the notions of "education" and "entertainment" appear together and are put into relation, though generally they are thought of as mutually exclusive. In this way one would take into account the domain of *play (esthetics)*—and "play" is a more fundamental concept than "fun" associated with the ephemeral, the superficial and even the frivolous and the individualistic.

This reorientation of graphic design also results in *liberation of graphic design from its ancillary status in the domain of advertising and promotion*. This de-linking does not mean to deny the economic importance of advertising and marketing, but the *environmental crisis* leads to questions about the ecological viability of a lifestyle and society centered on stimulation of sales and promotion of merchandises (from detergents to political candidates). Particularly in Latin America with its torn social fabric, the info-designer through his or her work might attend to needs less focused on competitive consumption, thus creating a counter-weight to a lifestyle that currently only a small segment of the society attains.

Professional profile of the info-designer

A profile of a profession can be defined with the help of a three-dimensional matrix:

1. *concerns* that are brought into play by a particular profession and that are addressed under a particular perspective (approach)
2. the *objects* of professional activity
3. the *competencies* (know-how) necessary to act efficiently in a particular domain.

We can use the medical profession as an example. A doctor looks at the human body from the perspective of illness and provides care. Objects of his professional activity include: diagnoses, surgical interventions, and prescriptions. In order to be capable of producing these objects, he needs knowledge of anatomy, physiology, and causes of illness.

The info-designer approaches the domain of communication from the perspective of organizing information with the aim of taking possible effective action. With a slight degree of exaggeration one could say, that *the final aim of the info-designer is not communication, but effective action*.

In the same way that a doctor takes care of human illness, the info-designer concentrates his or her attention on what I call "informational opacity." The info-designer would be a specialist in articulating information and *provides techniques to navigate in a highly complex information universe*. Apart from the traditional

2   I don't think that it is necessary to revive the old debate regarding esthetic sensibility. I take it for granted that the concern for esthetics is intrinsic to design.

printed objects, the info-designer would assume responsibility for *new groups of communication artifacts* that are based on informatics or computers:

- interface design for computer programs;
- design of "information bodies" (texts in both a metaphorical and broad sense) for formation, instruction, and entertainment;
- design of audio-visual means.

To intervene as designer in these new fields that are part of the *world-wide process of digitalization*, the info-designer needs the following competencies:

- be capable of *selecting and structuring information* and building coherent bodies of knowledge;
- be capable of *interpreting information and transforming it into objects of the retinal space,*
- be capable of understanding in productive terms the *interaction between language, graphics, sound, and music* (in the dimension of time),
- be capable of using *computer programs* for scripting, illustration, image editing, animation and desktop video, apart from programs for layout and letter design;
- be capable of managing the *constitutive elements of the retinal space* (color, texture, size, orientation, contrast, transitions in time, transformation, rhythm, etc.)
- be conversant with the analytical apparatus of *visual rhetoric;*
- be familiar with theories and techniques required to *evaluate the communicational efficiency* of design proposals;
- be capable of realizing *design studies* and design research (the *cognitive dimension of the design process*) and present design proposals in a coherent manner;
- manage design projects and companies (taking into account that an info-designer as partner or owner of a design studio is and has to be a manager of a firm).[2]

To this incomplete list I would add the competencies that are considered standard in the profession and academe:

- open *historical formation* in the domain of graphics, literature, art, music, science, technology, and industry;
- training in the *professional aspects,* such as contracts, determining fees, and professional ethics;
- knowledge of *production processes* in the domain of info-design and the socio-ecological impact of the work of the info-designer.

Core-curriculum for info-design

The list of responsibilities and competencies of the info-designer can be mapped onto a study program in different ways. The resulting program would reflect the local conditions and above all the interests and experiences of the persons which formulate the program, i.e. the faculty staff. In opposition to current models of design education, I would emphasize that an *up-to-date study program should include the cognitive domain of the design process*. As far as I know, this is not standard practice, though there are certainly attempts in different parts of the world to find a new approach to design education.

Perhaps there exists a consensus, particularly in the group of design students, that the central function of a study program consists in stimulating *creativity*. Sometimes, designers behave as if they own the monopoly on creativity, an attitude that can be found also in art circles. This attitude seems to me arrogant and obnoxious, and probably has contributed to the counterproductive tendency to set the world of design apart from the rest of the world. Creativity is not a gift of a happy few privileged persons selected by divine providence. Furthermore, it might be more appropriate to talk of *competence to innovate*. To be competent in innovation implies breaking of routines, and therefore courses devoted to creativity techniques consist basically a set of recommendations to break routines and taboos. I propose to put the term creativity into the deep freeze for a while.

With regard to the *terminology* for the various disciplines in a graphic design course we observe a certain incoherence. For example, what in one program is called "visual methodology", is called "basic design" or "design fundamentals" in another program. The content of the design discipline sometimes cannot be deduced from its name.

If we use the name of a scientific discipline, for instance, psychology, we don't get a clear idea about its content. For this reason, it might be more appropriate to use more descriptive names to characterize the various course items. To create such a program it is necessary to refer to diverse areas of human knowledge and to scientific disciplines that provide the know-how for grounding the work of the info-designer and protect it against the danger of short-sighted pragmatism:

- theories (psychology) of perception
- theory of language (in particular of speech acts)
- semiotics
- visual rhetoric
- cultural history (including art, literature, design, science, technology, and industry)
- history of visual communication
- anthropology of everyday life
- theories of communication and information

- philosophy of science
- applied mathematics (analytical and descriptive apparatus for describing shapes)
- basic concepts of programming and computer science
- basic concepts of management
- design theory and criticism to list but a few.

The description of the precise course content would constitute the future work of the group and provide a point of departure to put graphic design education on a more grounded and cognitively more demanding base.